

# **Legacies of Victorian Asylums in the landscape of contemporary British literature**

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# LEGACIES OF VICTORIAN ASYLUMS IN THE LANDSCAPE OF CONTEMPORARY BRITISH LITERATURE

Thomas Knowles

Historians of psychiatry and madness have pointed to the danger of losing the historical sites and records upon which their work depends. Andrew Scull hopes that

... at a time when research in the history of psychiatry is flourishing as never before, and when the range and scope of the work being undertaken is expanding remarkably, all this effort will not be undercut by the demise of the institutions themselves, and with it, the destruction of the crucial records upon which we all in the last analysis are dependent.<sup>1</sup>

Much work in the field since Foucault has concentrated upon expanding upon the discourses of power which he adumbrated, whilst establishing their veracity through careful attention to the historical record embodied in archives and the former asylum buildings which house them. An analogue of this anxiety is observable in twenty-first century literature which draws upon the historic resonance of such buildings and the stories that they have contained. These works perform an act of memorialization and mourning, whilst also making a political and historical case for the protection of sites of rich historical and imaginative potential. Indeed, the decadent imagination activated by ruins – their Gothic appeal – is part of the allure of these literatures. And yet there is an ambivalence to the literary portrayal of these buildings and their histories which is also apparent in recent social historical scholarship. The backlash against ‘care in the community’ and the consideration of the agency of families, patients and communities, within overarching discourses of governmental, societal and psychiatric power, have given rise to a more equivocal approach to asylumdom. As Diane Gittins concludes towards the end of her *Madness in its Place* (1998), ‘It is foolish to Romanticize the past of

asylums just as it is foolish to demonise them’,<sup>2</sup> to which must be added the ‘third way’ foolishness of pretending that they never existed.

In this chapter, I explore some of the recent representation of asylums in British literature and draw some parallels with historical scholarship in the field. What emerges is a complex interaction between the popular mythology and the historical reality of asylums. With the sources of careful historiography removed, the potential is for future works to lean ever more heavily upon the mythological rather than the historical. Literature and historiography have something of a chequered past in inadvertently lending their sensationalising weight to the neo-liberal cost-cutting agendas which have seen asylums emptied out and sold off, without adequate alternative provision, especially for those in need of long term care or with chronic conditions.

The selected authors are all, also, decidedly un-postmodern. Will Self and Iain Sinclair look back to Romanticism and Modernism, Self in particular flagging his novel as a belated response to the formal challenges which Modernism posed. Far from celebrating the flattening of discourse which comes from an evacuation of history, all of these authors draw upon personal, literary and sociological history as a creative source – a well-spring of the imagination. Whereas a postmodern author might celebrate the vacuous inhabitants of an evacuated former asylum – revelling in the surface ironies produced by a community paying to be shut up within the walls of a building, the carceral past of which they remain oblivious to – all of the authors discussed here resist such a psychopathic levelling.

Instances of former lunatic asylum buildings – whether in states of Romantic ruin or repurposed as business parks and exclusive apartments – appear with remarkable frequency in British literature of the early twenty-first century. The psychic resonances of these former locations of madness attract creative responses from across the arts spectrum and popular culture: film and television serials, modern Gothic horror and mystery novels, comic books,

computer games, literary fiction, historiography and biography, as well as the literary and filmic output of a loose and reluctantly labelled cabal of London-based ‘psychogeographers’.<sup>3</sup> This essay begins with a discussion of some recent literary responses to the closure and redevelopment of asylums, such as W. G. Sebald’s genre-defying *Austerlitz* (2001), Peter Ackroyd’s *London: The Biography* (2000), Iain Sinclair’s *London Orbital* (2002), Will Self and Ralph Steadman’s *Psychogeography* (2007), Will Self’s *Umbrella* (2012), James Scudamore’s *Wreaking* (2013), and Barbara Taylor’s memoir *The Last Asylum* (2014). These texts vary in their treatment of the asylum so that they may only appear as waypoints on larger perambulations, or else as part of broader histories being unfurled, whereas in others they are the central location and concern of the work. In all cases, though, an interest in the psychic residue of the buildings and their former inhabitants is in evidence, and the asylum and its history gestures towards the wider common themes of time, memory and erasure, and the ways in which these interact with space and perception, leading to an understanding of history as having an architecture, a notion ‘most glorious and horrible’.<sup>4</sup>

In *Austerlitz*, the eponymous character relates to the narrator an attempt to locate, through maze-like changing walls, the resonance of past suffering accumulated over centuries at the former site of the St Mary of Bethlehem asylum, Liverpool Street Station in the narrative present, undergoing extensive renovation.<sup>5</sup> At a later building site, Austerlitz muses upon the illusion of linear time, hypothesizing that what we experience as such is rather a structure of connected and simultaneous spaces, ‘interlocking according to the rules of a higher form of stereometry.’<sup>6</sup> Resisting the erasure of time (which may be illusory) and surfacing from the maze of historical renovations over time, is a Gothic return of repressed suffering and pain, of trauma. The return of the dead and buried, though, offers more than fear and renewed repression in the form of the possibility of a revelatory or transcendent experience. Austerlitz’s reveries are capable of transcending the Gothic maze of London’s

layered histories, reaching towards a new and emancipatory understanding of time. Peter Ackroyd's potted history of Bethlem Hospital (Bedlam) paints (with broad brushstrokes) the picture of an ongoing spectacle, now loosed upon the streets of the capital:

In more recent years too, the mentally ill have been released on medication 'into the community'. On the streets of London it is not uncommon to see passers-by talking rapidly to themselves and sometimes gesticulating wildly. On most main thoroughfares you will see a lone figure huddled in a posture of despair, or staring vacantly. Occasionally a stranger will shout at, or offer violence to, others.<sup>7</sup>

Having denigrated the hospital's Southwark incarnation as 'theatrical display designed to depict the triumph over lunacy in London', Ackroyd directs us to 'main thoroughfares' in order to witness the failure of contemporary London to either contain or alleviate lunacy.<sup>8</sup> Leaving aside the misleading association of the mentally unwell with violence toward the sane and their crude conflation with homeless, inebriated or simply angry people, the above quotation demonstrates a persistent unease at the release of mentally ill patients into the community.<sup>9</sup> In cataloguing their characteristic behaviour and likely haunts, we can read an attempt to orient the self in relation to the insane; no longer available for the thrill of viewing in 'theatres' such as Bedlam, it becomes important to track their whereabouts and behaviour - 'huddled in a posture of despair' - in relation to our (presumably sane) selves. Ackroyd reads unusual behaviour as insane, a generous category that might well include the contraflow peregrinations of psychogeographers.

In Scudamore's novel *Wreaking*, a dying man, Scriven, inhabits the ruins of the lunatic hospital in which he used to work - a ghost trying to come to terms with the memories of his family, and the pain and suffering of his former patients. 'The hospital itself should be lobotomized, its memories set free, to avenge all who were categorized here.'<sup>10</sup> The doctor fears the 'psychic pollution' of a place like *Wreaking*, which is built upon a 'compost of

anguish and torment’, a ‘geology of sadness’.<sup>11</sup> Scriven fears the erasure of history, not so much because a place like Wreaking ought to be remembered, but because of the danger that its psychic half-lives present to oblivious new inhabitants:

[a] brochure printed expensively on thick blue card, with artists’ impressions of happy families at play in Wreaking’s 180-acre grounds – the Largactil shuffle replaced by the dashing of gorgeous children ... The brochure referred to the building as a ‘Victorian Gem’ without saying what it had actually been.<sup>12</sup>

There is a fear of the return of the repressed in this text, an anxiety that a place divorced from its history might be doomed to repeat it, and the secrets of the dead may return to haunt the living, thus forgetting paradoxically raises the spectre of repetition. That the former inmates and employees of asylums seem drawn to return to their dilapidated former environs, or to the developments that have replaced them, speaks to the human desire to revisit places that have been called home, as well as to the psychological compulsion to repeat trauma, and to the apocryphal return of the perpetrator to the scene of the crime. It is a trope that appears in many of the texts discussed in this chapter. In some of the literature discussed thus far, sites which have witnessed such trauma offer the opportunity to enter a reverie or transcendent state which reaches outside time, or collapses past and present into the now. In others, a repetition of trauma is all that can be achieved. Working against this anxiety, though, is the desire to monumentalize, to undo erasure and to unearth the historical and emotional repressed. It is a process that makes the past potentially available for post-processing, perhaps psychoanalytically.

In the prologue to her ‘memoir of madness’, *The Last Asylum*, Taylor revisits the site of her ‘loony bin’, which is now a luxury apartment complex.<sup>13</sup> She experiences the sensation of having the memory of herself cleansed from a place:

No footsteps, no cries, no rattle of keys ... Silence. So we have really been exorcized then? Not even the echoes of our voices trapped in the walls? Surely the stench of our cigarettes, our endless cigarettes, must still be detectable? But all I can smell is fresh paint and floor polish.<sup>14</sup>

At first Taylor is bewildered by the changes to the asylum, evoking the Gothic in her description of passages that lead to nowhere and convoluted ‘womb-like rooms’, arched ceilings and ‘odd little corners’.<sup>15</sup> Once she can see how the developers have reshaped the hospital, though, she ‘abruptly’ loses interest and leaves.<sup>16</sup> Here the erasure of history seems complete: revisiting the site of past traumas has not caused their return, and the building which was purpose built as Colney Hatch Lunatic Asylum, latterly Friern Mental Hospital, far from being a psychical beacon in the landscape of London, elicits only boredom.<sup>17</sup>

Contemporary depictions of insane asylums might be read as epiphenomena of the projects of memorialization in writing which seeks to resist the erasure of totalizing capitalist monoculture. This chapter will now turn to Iain Sinclair’s *London Orbital* and Will Self’s *Umbrella* as examples of the contemporary use of former asylums as focal points for a kind of ambulatory resistance to particular cultural, political and economic forces.

### ***London Orbital***

On one of the legs of his circumambulation of the M25, detailed in *London Orbital*, Iain Sinclair is drawn to Shenley Manor, the site of a former lunatic asylum which has been privately bought and turned into a luxury housing estate. The resonances here are historical more than psychic, and the changes of modernity resist the revelations which seemed to come thick and fast in Sebald’s *Austerlitz*. Sinclair writes of the almost completed historical amnesia, but which his walk resists:

For centuries this house and its surrounding estate were a dominant feature of the local landscape, and witness to many changes, not least its encirclement by Shenley Hospital in the 1930's ... 'The Mansion has had a fascinating history.' *Has had*.

Present perfect. History, once again, put in its place. The future used up.<sup>18</sup>

By straying a little from the path set by the motorway, Sinclair excavates the history of the manor, the hospital that surrounded it, the village and the parish church too. It is pulled back into the orbit of London, and into the personal mythology of Sinclair's obsessions: here, most prominently, London architect Hawksmoor (who is buried nearby in what used to be a church graveyard, now in the shadow of a block of flats), and resisting the decontamination, compartmentalization and erasure of history. Always with Sinclair there is the feeling that he and his companions are resisting new (old) forms of enclosure, fighting a battle that they have been losing since the thirteenth century. Shenley asylum had performed its own act of enclosure, the past now buried under multiple layers of whitewash: 'monuments without inscriptions, twisted signposts.'<sup>19</sup> Their archaeological tools are perambulation, reading and recording – taking history with them on their circumnavigation in the form of their own memories and hard copy books in backpacks, recording as they go in notebooks and on film. Ready to re-bequeath the landscape a version of its vanishing history, Sinclair's companion Renchi has been reading Foucault's *Madness and Civilization*:

A fitting complement to this stage of our walk. Asylums haunt the motorway like abandoned forts, the kind of defensive ring once found on the Thames below Tilbury. Hospital colonies are black mandalas of madness: circles set around a central axis, depictions of an unstable brain chemistry. Shenley is a hilltop encampment, Cadbury or Maiden castle; Napsbury is a winged creature. The fantastic sigils of the madhouse architects dominate the map, the docile north-west quadrant of our journey.<sup>20</sup>



The above sequence exemplifies the pathologizing of the landscape which psychogeography performs, '[m]ovement provoke[ing] memory.'<sup>21</sup> To traverse the landscape by ordinary means – car, train or bus – is to accept economic imperative and speed as the overriding factors of journey-making, and to passively endorse the sanctification of the landscape. The spectre of history provokes Gothic imagery, Sinclair's likening of former asylums to abandoned forts and winged creatures signalling a return of the repressed which is duly gratified in the retelling of a patient's story, 'an unmarried shepherd who was committed to an asylum in 1857, suffering from severe seizures'.<sup>22</sup> The shepherd was wont, or rather compelled, to walk in small clockwise circles: '[h]is epic peregrination, the few yards of a hospital ward, is a doomed attempt to recover memory'.<sup>23</sup> Circles within circles ('in the courtyard inmates describe small circles') and movements within movements;<sup>24</sup> the epic walk evinces the great circuit to nowhere of the M25 and brings other smaller revolutions within its orbit too – a process of nesting which is also encountered in *Umbrella*, a compulsive inclusion of everything: "[h]e had an obsessive conviction that he should put the whole world, and the heavens and angels, in his head, or in his heart".<sup>25</sup> These acts of encompassing, both small and grand, compound the image of asylums as worlds within worlds – 'Claybury [Mental Hospital] was a city in exile' – micro-communities complete with their own means of food production, water storage, manufacture and even gas works. All the more sinister for that when they are emptied out, abandoned, waiting for complete erasure in 'the half-life of discontinued surveillance',<sup>26</sup> all the more necessary to bring what rags remain into the orbit of Sinclair's peripatetic historiography:

Some account of the hospital's history has been published, but isn't available. We give our names and addresses and receive a promise that information will be sent to us in due course. But we understand this will never happen. The energy has gone out

of the place. The hut that once belonged to the Shenley airfield has infected the other buildings; they're demob happy. The war's over and the future hasn't begun.<sup>27</sup>

But the attempt is exhausting and seems to end in failure, the duo leaving the former asylum in darkness as they head back to the M25's 'magical resonance'.<sup>28</sup> The contraplexual message of Sinclair's project is evident in this visit to Shenley. *London Orbital's* aesthetic demands the discovery of such entropic domains of exhausted history even as Sinclair's politics decry the processes responsible for their creation: 'Green is seductive. There's something unnatural about its chemistry. Nature, bent and abused, is grey. We're happy with grey variables: silver to sludge.'<sup>29</sup> Conversely, the former asylum's very ambulatory inclusion in the walk around the M25 serves to charge it with contemporary meaning, writing it into the history of the closure and sell-off of former lunatic asylums, 'with little or no public debate, no accountability'.<sup>30</sup> What this history cannot do, except in glimpses and second hand retellings, like that of the shepherd above, is preserve the records of the lives lived in former asylums, latterly mental hospitals: 'So much of the East End, so many real East Enders, were decanted into this hilltop settlement ... In skips outside the gates of Claybury, men in yellow hard hats were burning the hospital records.'<sup>31</sup> Herein lies the real crime of the private redevelopment of public institutions; not in the public loss of fine examples of Victorian architecture and landscaping (though that is to be lamented too), but in the erasure of the narratives of the lives of real people. This is detail that can inform careful historiographical research as well as fiction and travelogue, some of the evidence for which went up in smoke in that skip outside Claybury Mental Hospital. How much more of the history of asylums and mental hospitals has been 'used up' in this way?

Sinclair, like Self, Taylor and Scudamore, captures the irony of these former 'total institutions' being transformed into surveilled, gated communities for the wealthy: "'a total living environment'", according to developer Crest Homes,<sup>32</sup> an uncanny echo of the 'total

institution' of the asylum. Returning to their car parked at Leavesdon Mental Hospital, now reimagined as the private housing estate Leavesdon Court, Sinclair muses on the role of country asylums as places of amnesia and forgetting:

Out here on the motorway rim there were no memories. Nothing had happened. All accounts of incarceration, all voyages towards recovery, begin with that journey: the cart, the ambulance, the distance between home and the walled nowhere.<sup>33</sup>

The former asylums in the orbit of the M25 (Sinclair figures them as space stations at one point)<sup>34</sup> have swallowed lives and memories for centuries. Perhaps now in their failure to preserve them – even in the rudiments of case notes and diagnoses, treatments and admittance forms – they are merely fulfilling their ultimate amnesiac purpose as charnel houses of forgotten trauma.

The search for insanity in the former lunatic asylums and their grounds proved fruitless, excepting a generalized and 'unauthored' depression.<sup>35</sup> The asylums are 'islands of the damned. From which the damned have vanished', <sup>36</sup> jettisoned into the wider but still walled circumference of the M25. CCTV and electronic gates now work to keep insanity *out* of these 'hill forts', pushing it back within the remit of the motorway. The mad architecture of the great Victorian asylums, particularly those designed by George Thomas Hine, with their road-length curving corridors which both Sinclair and Self compare to particle accelerator chambers, seem to foreshadow the greater curvature of the M25. Self casts asylums as 'dark starships' waiting to bequeath their payloads of madness upon Greater London.<sup>37</sup>

### ***Umbrella***

Friern Mental Hospital, or Colney Hatch as it was previously known, is also the central location for Will Self's novel *Umbrella*, the ferrule from beneath which arc a multitude of

narrative ribs. If part of the project of Self's earlier novels, short stories and psychogeographic traversals of the greater London conurbation had been to locate lunacy, or at least to stretch its legs,<sup>38</sup> *Umbrella* in a sense is the quest come full circle; the miles of lino (beneath which lies the original tarmac) corridor encircling the cells/rooms of at one time over one thousand inmates was emphatically where madness was to be contained, a noose the patients tightened with each bout of festinate ambulation. In a nod to Sinclair's perambulation of the M25 in *London Orbital*, Self calls the road distances of the ward round at Friern a 'North circular of the soul' – roadway distances accentuating the inversions of world and asylum.<sup>39</sup> *Umbrella* is less overtly satirical and more formally inventive than Self's previous works (with the possible exception of the Sebald-like *Walking to Hollywood* (2010)), and yet it goes back to the root causes of much of what his other fictions discourse upon. The mental health wards and pioneering anti-psychiatry (mercilessly mocked) in 'The Quantity Theory of Insanity' (1991) are the cause or result of the asylum closure program initiated by Enoch Powell in 1961.<sup>40</sup> The closure of Friern Barnet in 1993 paradoxically releases some of Self's characters, such as the irrepressible Dr Busner, into the community of his earlier fiction.<sup>41</sup> Audrey Death/ De'Ath/Dearth is one of Busner's post *encephalitis lethargica*, profoundly Parkinsonian, patients at Friern, whom he and the other staff refer to affectionately as 'enkies'. Like her incarnation in *How the Dead Live* (2000), in which novel she continues to 'live' on (despite confirmed rumours of her death), the Audrey of *Umbrella* stages a dramatic return from her frozen, timeless existence, thanks to the action of the 'miracle drug' L-DOPA. The use of L-DOPA at Friern is pioneered by Dr Busner, Audrey being one of only a handful of trial subjects. This component of the story borrows much from Oliver Sacks's *Awakenings* (1973), in which the psychiatrist and author describes his attempts to reawaken post-encephalitic and Parkinsonian patients with L-DOPA.<sup>42</sup> What enables Sacks (and indeed Dr Busner) to rediagnose and successfully treat the 'enkies' is, in part, the careful study of the

patients' case notes. Busner is certain that, due to the poor transcribing of Audrey's name, and the protean transformations of her diagnosis over the years, had she in fact moved to another institution due to ward closures or the sale of Friern, her trail would have been nigh on impossible to follow.<sup>43</sup> Barbara Taylor makes this case too in *The Last Asylum*, warning that 'when history goes, so do the people who are produced by it, whose stories evaporate into a rootless, unbegotten present.'<sup>44</sup> By piecing together a history of Audrey's time in the asylum, latterly mental hospital, Busner is able to build upon the tentative notes of previous doctors and arrive at a new diagnosis which turns out to be (albeit fleetingly) susceptible to drug therapy. Friern, Audrey's 'stone mother' (to borrow Taylor's evocative phrase)<sup>45</sup> has kept Audrey in her sleep, carrying a payload of First World War trauma into the present. But had it not been there any longer – if the asylum had been repurposed or left to rack and ruin, like so many other institutions – she might have been denied her brief reawakening. The title *Umbrella* has been variously attributed to James Joyce's *Ulysses* – 'a brother is as easily forgotten as an umbrella';<sup>46</sup> to the structure of the novel's branching arcs (by Self himself);<sup>47</sup> and to the slang name used by doctors and nurses for the chemical calming of unruly patients.<sup>48</sup> To this can be added the notion that Friern itself has been a shelter, a 'stone mother', an umbrella to those in need of a place to be mentally unwell or for those who have temporarily lost their homes.<sup>49</sup>

The concept of nesting (mentioned above in the discussion of *London Orbital*) is if anything more prevalent in *Umbrella* – obsessively so. Audrey Death is doubly entombed – both in the asylum and in her frozen, catatonic body. A further layer is descended by her sense of time – perpetually reliving the years before her collapse and incarceration. As the case stories in *Awakenings* make clear, this hallucinatory experience of the past can be both a curse and a boon to the frozen patients; at times the mind seems to be providing compensatory illusions, at others condemning the sufferer to a nightmare beyond the reach of

speech or thought.<sup>50</sup> Audrey adds a further stage of nesting in her annual creation of a ‘spring shrine’, an echo of a childhood game she played on the streets of London. Each year, Audrey constructs one of these grottos underneath her bed at the hospital, a nest enshrining her childhood innocence.<sup>51</sup>

Nesting reflects the enkies’ experience of time and space in their catatonic states, as well as their compulsive behaviours unleashed in the latter stages of L-DOPA treatment. For Sacks, the reports that his patients bring back from the inner space of decades of catatonia calls for an entirely new metaphysics: ‘unexpectedly vast vistas [are] emerging’, the enkies are ‘lost in space and time’ and ‘harbouring a chaos of broken clocks and rulers’.<sup>52</sup> They speak, too, of ideas within ideas, of maps that cover the whole territory and endless repetitions of ‘I-am I-am I-am’,<sup>53</sup> becoming stratified timeless entities of halted existential directedness; a Matryoshka doll-like nesting of circumstance and petrified being. Sacks’s patient ‘Hester. Y’ described to him the weirdness of the frozen states which began to intermittently plague him again after a short time of normality on L-DOPA. Sacks illustrates them thus:

These states ... may be described in purely visual terms, while understanding that they may affect *all* thought and behaviour. The still picture has no true or continuous perspective, but is seen as a perfectly flat dovetailing of shapes, or a series of wafer-thin planes. Curves are differentiated into discrete, discontinuous steps: a circle seen as a polygon. There is no sense of space, or solidity of extension, no sense of objects except as facets geometrically apposed. There is no sense of movement, or the possibility of movement, and no sense of process or forces or field. There is no emotion or cathexis in this crystalline world ...<sup>54</sup>

Self, like Shakespeare, has no respect for the unities; *Umbrella* evinces its own flattening of the world by dispensing with the customary distinctions of time, narrative voice and place.

Compare the above with Dr Busner's patient, Andrew, and his experience of 'an eternal present, *an awful and unchanging Now*'.<sup>55</sup> The text segues between 1918, 1971 and 2010, and from the point of view of Dr Busner, Audrey Death and her brother Stanley. Taylor in *The Last Asylum* relates a fellow patient's reasoning for the closure of Friern: "It has to close ... The devil is here, down in the cellar. They tried getting him out, but he won't go. Can't you hear him down there?".<sup>56</sup> Part of the work of *Umbrella* is to show that the microcosm of the asylum/mental hospital community reflects and perpetuates purportedly external conditions: if the asylum appears to be run by the lunatics, if it is cruel and neglectful and wasteful and beyond cure, then that is because it resembles and replicates the outside world. The devil is not in the basement, he is banging on the window trying to get in. This reversal is flagged early on:

...he [Busner] had looked upon the city as an inversion, seeing the parallelograms of dark woodland and dormant grass as man-made artefacts surrounded by growing brick, Tarmac and concrete that ripples away to the horizon along the furrows of suburban streets...<sup>57</sup>

Such inversions persist and repeat: the beading moisture on the flaky ceilings of Friern falls as a 'rusty old rain' of sweated paraldehyde upon the patients' heads, and is echoed/prefigured by the 'dripping earthen sky' of the trenches below the trenches where Stanley Death and his fellow 'troglodytes' wait out the war in strange purgatory.<sup>58</sup> Trenches below trenches: another nested enclave to which Stanley is removed after a friendly shell buries him in a crater, and where a utopian, egalitarian society is formed in utero, expressed in homosexual, interracial and interclass love. Similarly, Audrey Death dreams of her incarceration at 'the booby hatch' as a proletarian occupation of the former sites of oppression – a classless, empowered, female-led uprising.<sup>59</sup> These hallucinated alternatives to

Stanley's death and Audrey's confinement dramatize the broken promises of a wartime generation: the erasure of Friern covers up the lie.

Audrey and Stanley have another sibling. Albert Death (who restyles himself as De'Ath) is the machine to their emotion – a living calculator who seems to owe his longevity in part to an oil-like concoction of molasses and milk stout. There is an oblique triangle of causality between the brothers and sisters. Audrey the munitionette, although a conscientious worker, may well have hammered and gun-cotton-stuffed the very shell that flattened Stanley, whereas the conditions under which she worked that led to such high levels of dud shells being produced were the brainchild of Albert in his capacity at the ministry of defence. Similarly, the ten-hour shifts of repetitive machine-like motions which Audrey endures as a munitionette might be said to have triggered her Parkinsonian susceptibility and to have cemented the form that her illness would take after the sleeping sickness had passed. Between the three of them they represent a great swathe of wartime experience – the home front, the trenches and the people pulling the strings. The linking of their conscious and unconscious minds – sometimes fluidly, sometimes jarringly like the snagging gears of a machine – bequeaths an experience both meta and intimate of the conditions that produced the short twentieth century. Part of what we come to understand through the Busner-centred 1971 and 2010 sequences is that the long-standing inmates of Friern, those produced by the industrial era, no longer fit the bill for a mental patient; as Ian Hacking puts it: 'In every generation there are quite firm rules on how to behave when you are crazy'.<sup>60</sup> In 1971, Dr Busner has premonitions of the closure of Friern, drifting into a vision of its crumbling façade haunted by returning patients,<sup>61</sup> so that his attempt to 'cure' the enkiés with radical drug therapy can be seen as an attempt to forestall their ejection from its walls – where else would they receive the complete care that their conditions required?



Colney Hatch was built upon the principles of moral treatment in the heyday of the Victorian Asylum system. At the same time, and in opposition to this, the sheer volume of patients necessitated conformity to the principles of mechanized production: ‘industrial scale wrong-headedness towards the mentally ill’.<sup>62</sup> The planned accommodation for one thousand patients (three thousand at its 1950s peak) was the asylum system imagined on a factory scale, mass production of effective treatment seemed in the end to lead to the mechanized perpetuation and consolidation of misery and madness. There were warnings about the pitfalls of this kind of macro management of lunatics in the nineteenth century from eminent practitioners such as John Conolly.<sup>63</sup> *Umbrella* depicts this mechanized, industrial scale treatment through the extended metaphor of warfare and factory production. The descriptive techniques Self employs to depict ward rounds, patients in the airing courts and corridors (and even a game of golf) align these non-combat practices with trench warfare and the munitions factories that sustained it. The mechanized warfare of World War I, the horrors and deprivations of frontline entrenched combat, is figured as a brutal factory-line mass-producing victims of shell-shock, traumatic stress disorder and *encephalitis lethargica*, the condition which afflicted Audrey Death. By the same token, this impersonal mass production of mental maladies is remedied by the macro-economic administration of powerful sedatives; patients are managed en masse, crop sprayed with Largactil, rather than individually treated. Mirroring this, Self depicts the Western Front as a vast generalized Parkinsonism, an enormous palsied hand with the explosions of bombardments and rattle of machinegun fire figured as its pathological shaking.<sup>64</sup> In his digital interactive essay, ‘Kafka’s Wound’ (2012), Self quotes Robert Musil on insane asylums: ‘[i]t was Robert Musil, an early and consistent champion of Kafka’s writing, who in *The Man without Qualities* wrote of asylums for the insane that “they have something of hell’s lack of imagination.”’<sup>65</sup>

in the contrast between the jinglingly innocent jingoism of the Great Powers' armies as they trotted off to a short war, confident in August 1914 that it would all be over by Christmas, and the subsequent assembly lines of death that snaked their way across Europe lay the very crucible of modern irony.<sup>66</sup>

*Umbrella* has the 'enkies' of Friern re-enact the terrible inertia of the Western Front – the fighting to a standstill – in their ticcing so fast that they literally freeze. In 'Kafka's Wound', Self delivers an exhaustive and compelling context for the writing of Kafka's short story 'The Country Doctor'. In contrast to its frozen moments, *Umbrella* is frequently restless, full of movement, forever marching down corridors, driving, on patient rounds, singing, machine-lathing, typing, bussing about London, burrowing in trenches; its perspectives are itinerant, so it is in a sense a psychogeographic text. Psychogeography itself can be thought of as a pathological movement – an aimless wandering with intent – the intent being to discover context. *Umbrella* reveals nothing that is not produced by its circumstances, the narrator's voice over-determined by the italic intrusion of its subjects' ejaculations of thought. Movement provokes memory, thought, ideas.

The miraculous reawakening of Dr Busner's patients is tragically short-lived. Busner is given an ultimatum by his long-suffering wife: come on holiday with us or else make sure you're not here when we get back.<sup>67</sup> Upon returning from his holiday he finds that his patients have had their L-DOPA withdrawn and are plunged even deeper into profound catatonia, some with the further complication of extreme ticcing – Audrey in particular is so severe that she has to be restrained in her chair. Busner's initial reaction is enraged, shouting at a nurse about the asylum's founding principles of non-restraint, but his future incarnation remembers moving on from Friern only a few months later. He does not return until 2010. Busner not only forgets his 'enkies', he also seems to lose his progressive zeal – perfunctorily

performing Electro Convulsive Therapy (ECT) and freely prescribing Largactil at his future posts.

In his dotage, himself institutionalized in the uniform of old age, ‘baggy trousers and shabby jackets, a new simpler identity to replace who you thought you were’,<sup>68</sup> Busner finds himself ineluctably drawn across London to the former asylum, Friern. He finds there ‘a quote prestigious housing development unquote’,<sup>69</sup> which he is shown around by a sales representative. The great Large Hadron Collider of a corridor has been fragmented into intermittent gestures towards its massive curvature, points on a graph curve, but he nonetheless finds himself at the exact position in which he had discovered Audrey Death, hunched almost double and defeated in her festinate *dérive* by a dislodged floor tile; her accusatory memory still infused into the fabric of the old asylum, staring at him in the akenesic form of a coat hook.<sup>70</sup> By returning to the scene of the crime, Busner understands the nature of his guilt: ‘*I forgot them all ... And it’s too late*’.<sup>71</sup>

### **A Theory of Walking to Asylums**

The permanent present in which Self writes speaks to the uncanny housing developments that occupy the space where by rights there should be dilapidated Gothic ruins or even a smoking crater. In contemporary literature, former asylum buildings and grounds are psychically resonant but the empirical redeveloped experience resists and attempts to smooth away such epiphenomena, bland marketing masking the wilful destruction of the historical record. Henri Lefebvre has coined the term ‘rhythmanalysis’ for a process of investigation which pays close attention to the internal rhythms of the body and the ways in which they interact with – are altered, attenuated and perpetuated – by the external rhythms of the city, the world, the universe. What he has to say about lived time and history seems relevant to the methods of Sinclair and Self: ‘Are there not alternatives to memory and forgetting: periods where the

past returns – and periods where the past effaces itself? Perhaps such an alternative would be the rhythm of history.’<sup>72</sup> In their catatonic states the ‘enkies’ of *Umbrella* are rhythmically unfathomable to the healthy human being – timeless and ticking so fast as to become immobile, or else operating at speeds that require time lapse photography to capture. They emerge briefly and ebulliently into ordinary rhythmic time with the aid of L-DOPA, before being dragged back to their previous states, snapping back like elastic, perhaps in response to the incompatible rhythms of 1971 with their own internal rhythms of the industrial era.

Lefebvre also writes of the ‘eurhythmics’ of the industrial era building to an ‘arrhythmic’ crescendo of chaos and destruction in World War I.<sup>73</sup> Institutional inertia has its part to play too: the ‘enkies’ emerge as fully-functional human beings into a ‘total institution’ where they are treated much as they were before – as dependent matter to be managed. Sacks in *Awakenings* speculates on the possible exacerbation of Parkinsonian symptoms by the unnatural rhythms of cities, hospitals and technology and proposes a realignment with natural rhythms of night and day, the tide, the seasons and other such cycles.<sup>74</sup> Thinking about the overarching themes of this chapter, though, rhythmanalysis can help to build an understanding of what these texts represent in terms of resistance and of a snapshot of time, of their particular historical moment. In Lefebvre’s terms we are in a period in which the past effaces itself – a feeling captured by the amnesiac repurposing of former lunatic asylums and in the crime of forgetting of which Dr Busner is guilty. In recording this process underway, the texts also resist its erosive action, proposing an active historiography which is temporal in the sense of actually taking place in the spaces that are psychically and historically resonant – ‘Movement provokes memory’.<sup>75</sup> In keeping with psychogeography’s Situationist heritage, there is an echo of Guy Debord’s aperçus from *The Society of the Spectacle* (1968) in all of this ‘history used up’ and the ‘permanent present’. Take, for example, from no. 177: “‘On this spot nothing will ever happen, and *nothing ever has* ... the forces of *historical absence*

begin to compose their own exclusive landscape””.<sup>76</sup> Debord writes of a ‘flattened universe’ with ‘real life’ having been ‘deported behind the screen of the spectacle’.<sup>77</sup> The act of walking against the grain which contemporary psychogeographers recommend is a refusal of the literal flattening of the landscape by public transport and motorways, and a rejection of the spectacle’s ‘monopoly of appearance’ by visiting sites without economic purpose in order to hymn their erased pasts.<sup>78</sup>

Catherine Arnold in *Bedlam* notes that ‘[t]he mad, like the poor, have always been with us’.<sup>79</sup> Just like the poor – who for centuries have been deposited in workhouses, denied representation, sent to war and, latterly, quarantined in council estates – civilization has striven to isolate and contain madness. But thinking with Debord suggests that lunatic asylums represented concentrated pools of psychological resistance to the spectacle – reified pockets of refusal and case studies of the casualties of the status quo. In this way their closure, redevelopment and erasure from history is comparable to the breaking of picket lines and emasculation of the unions, to the schizophrenic flattening of everyday life. People are no longer mad, insane, in need of asylum. The mentally unwell are service users who only occasionally need quarantining if they break the terms of their service agreements by, for instance, refusing to take their medicine. Madness recuperated. Where that proves impossible, Lisa Appignanesi has suggested that criminal incarceration has proved efficacious: ‘Policy makers might also find it worth noting that on the whole when asylum populations go up, prison populations go down, and vice versa.’<sup>80</sup>

The intention here is not to bemoan the closure of asylums, nor to denigrate the provision of mental health care in the community. Sarah Wise is right to point out (contra Foucault) that quantitatively the epithet ‘century of incarceration’ belongs to Hobsbawm’s short twentieth century.<sup>81</sup> In what ought to have been a more enlightened era of mental health provision, Sarah Wise blames the misguided appropriations of Darwin’s theories in the shape

of eugenics, the professionalization of the mad doctors and the confusion and conflation of what we would now call disabilities with illness and pathology.<sup>82</sup>

The contemporaneity of the resurgence of psychogeography and the advent of ‘care in the community’ in Britain, appears to be more than coincidental. Indeed, the sites of former lunatic asylums have been, along with abandoned factories and housing developments, favourite destinations or waypoints for psychogeographic *dérives*, embodiments of the urban and suburban Gothic which owe an inheritance to, amongst others, the fiction of J. G. Ballard.<sup>83</sup> The transformation of former lunatic asylums into business parks and expensive out of town commuter apartments has also seen a conscious effort to memorialize these buildings through literary and other artistic production, and has fed into psychogeography’s obsessive attempts to produce a psychical topography of the territory of London and its satellite towns. The fugue states and *dérives* of the early psychogeographers, and their adoption of certain sites in Paris, find an uncanny parallel in the wandering mad which Foucault describes in *Madness and Civilization*,<sup>84</sup> and to the mentally ill today whose ‘vacant expressions’ and intense monologues Peter Ackroyd has witnessed. Psychogeography might be said to owe some of its transgressive appeal to its practitioners’ seeming madness – who today walks to an airport or traverses a motorway on foot? Psychogeographers trespass upon the territory of wasteland and edgelands just as the released lunatic encroaches upon the territory of the sane. The combination of contraflow perambulation and historiography might be seen as an attempt to resist and transcend the terrifying prospect of an architectural history. At the same time it asks the reader/practitioner to pay attention to what lies beneath the surface – whether it be the timeless façade of an asylum disguised as exclusive apartments or the rigour-like mask of a Parkinsonian patient – psychogeography aids and abets the peeling back of the layers of history, enabling a vision of time.

The traumatic move from an industrial to a finance and services economy over the last fifty years has been echoed in the changing roles of the lunatic asylum and its patients – from patients to ‘service users’, and from a factory model to a dispersed, individually led model, infused with the rhetoric of choice. We might call this the ‘neo-liberalisation’ of mental health provision.<sup>85</sup> Walking against the grain in and out of cities and making destinations of the sites of attempted historical erasures, offers the utopian potential of realizing Stanley Death’s dreams of glass towers separated by Elysian Fields. Stanley was only half right in his predictions, but to walk across territory is an act of possession – a statement of the right to be somewhere, even just to *be*. To walk to the sites of former asylums is to insist on their therapeutic intent and to activate thinking about their histories – good and bad – in context, refusing the nested rings of architectural, institutional and infrastructural entrapment.

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<sup>1</sup> A. Scull, ‘Rethinking the History of Asylumdom’ in J. Melling. and B. Forsythe. (eds) *Insanity, Institutions and Society, 1800-1914: A Social History of Madness in Comparative Perspective* (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 312.

<sup>2</sup> D. Gittins, *Madness In Its Place: Narratives of Severalls Hospital, 1913-1997* (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 233.

<sup>3</sup> Psychogeography, according to Merlin Coverley, is a literary movement, a political strategy, a set of new ideas and avant-garde practices. See M. Coverley, *Psychogeography* (London: Pocket Essentials, 2010), p. 9.

<sup>4</sup> A. Moore and E. Campbell, *From Hell* (London: Knockabout, 2000 [1999]), p. 15.

<sup>5</sup> W. G. Sebald, *Austerlitz* (London: Penguin, 2002 [2001]), p. 183.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 261.

<sup>7</sup> P. Ackroyd, *London: The Concise Biography* (London: Vintage, 2012 [2000]), p. 520.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 519.

<sup>9</sup> Foucault points to the post-Renaissance lack of distinction between homelessness and insanity in Paris, in *Madness and Civilization* (London: Routledge, 2001 [1961]), pp. 44-60.

<sup>10</sup> J. Scudamore, *Wreaking* (London: Harvill Secker, 2013), p. 87.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> B. Taylor, *The Last Asylum: A Memoir of Madness in Our Times* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2014), p. x.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid* p. ix.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> The north London asylum was opened in 1851 and finally closed in 1993.

<sup>18</sup> I. Sinclair, *London Orbital* (London: Penguin, 2003 [2002]), p. 153, emphasis original.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 164.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 163.

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- <sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 164.
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>23</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>25</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 165.
- <sup>27</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>28</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 88.
- <sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 166.
- <sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 167.
- <sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 168.
- <sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 172.
- <sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 168.
- <sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 172.
- <sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 166.
- <sup>37</sup> W. Self, *Umbrella*, p. 155.
- <sup>38</sup> Lunacy, mental hospitals and psychiatrists abound in Self's oeuvre. See note 44.
- <sup>39</sup> Self, *Umbrella* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013) p. 5.
- <sup>40</sup> Powell's bill enacted by parliament in the face of series crises and doubts as to the efficacy of the asylum model.
- <sup>41</sup> Dr Busner appears in *The Book of Dave*, *The Quantity Theory of Insanity*, *Great Apes*, *Walking to Hollywood* and various short stories. Models for this eccentric psychiatrist include R. D. Laing and Oliver Sacks.
- <sup>42</sup> L-DOPA is a natural precursor of dopamine - laevodihydroxyphenylalanine - first used to replenish dopamine levels in Parkinsonian patients. See O. Sacks, *Awakenings* (London: Picador, 2012 [1973]), p. 34.
- <sup>43</sup> Self, *Umbrella*, pp. 80-81.
- <sup>44</sup> Taylor, *The Last Asylum* p. 262. There is more room for optimism in the case of Friern, whose files have been saved from the skip and archived at the London Metropolitan Authority, as Taylor notes on *ibid.* p. 101.
- <sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 262.
- <sup>46</sup> J. Joyce, *Ulysses* (London: Penguin, 2000 [1922]), the line is quoted on the recto flyleaf of *Umbrella* immediately preceding the first page.
- <sup>47</sup> *The Observer*, Sunday 5 August 2012.
- <sup>48</sup> Self, *Umbrella*, p. 124.
- <sup>49</sup> Taylor, *The Last Asylum* p. 125.
- <sup>50</sup> See for instance that of 'Gertie C.' Sacks, *Awakening*, pp. 183-4.
- <sup>51</sup> Self, *Umbrella*, p. 306.
- <sup>52</sup> Sacks, *Awakening*, pp. 284-286.
- <sup>53</sup> Self, *Umbrella*, p. 293.
- <sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 112, emphasis original.
- <sup>55</sup> See *ibid.* pp. 234-5 for a fuller description of Andrew's experience of Parkinsonian time.
- <sup>56</sup> Taylor, *The Last Asylum*, p. 118.
- <sup>57</sup> Self, *Umbrella*, p. 2.
- <sup>58</sup> Ibid., pp. 6, 332.
- <sup>59</sup> Ibid., pp. 342-4.
- <sup>60</sup> Quoted in Lisa Appignanesi, *Mad, Bad and Sad: A History of Women and the Mind Doctors from 1800 to the Present* (London: Virago, 2013 [2008]), p. 5.
- <sup>61</sup> Self, *Umbrella*, p. 93.
- <sup>62</sup> S. Wise, *Inconvenient People: Lunacy, Liberty and the Mad Doctors in Victorian England* (London: Vintage, 2013 [2012]), p. 384.
- <sup>63</sup> See, for example, A. Scull, *The Most Solitary of Afflictions: Madness and Society in Britain, 1700-1900* (London: Yale University Press, 1993), p. 168.
- <sup>64</sup> Self, *Umbrella* pp. 228-9.
- <sup>65</sup> Will Self, 'Kafka's Wound' *London Review of Books* (2012), <http://thespace.lrb.co.uk/>
- <sup>66</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>67</sup> It is interesting that Self makes the abandonment of the trial hinge upon a holiday; in reading *Awakenings* the reader cannot help but feel incredulity when Sacks goes away for long breaks in the middle of his patients' reawakenings, sometimes returning to find disastrous alteration in their conditions.
- <sup>68</sup> Self, *Umbrella*, pp. 33-4.
- <sup>69</sup> Ibid., p. 241.
- <sup>70</sup> Ibid., p. 397.



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- <sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 395.
- <sup>72</sup> H. Lefebvre, trans. S. Eldon and G. Moore, *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013 [1992]), p. 61.
- <sup>73</sup> Ibid., p. 30.
- <sup>74</sup> Sacks, *Awakening*, p. 349.
- <sup>75</sup> Sinclair, *London Orbital*, p. 164.
- <sup>76</sup> G. Debord, trans. Black & Red, *The Society of the Spectacle* (London: Notting Hill Editions, 2013 [1968]), p. 123, emphasis original.
- <sup>77</sup> Ibid., p. 148.
- <sup>78</sup> Ibid., p. 7.
- <sup>79</sup> C. Arnold, *Bedlam: London and Its Mad* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2008), p. 1.
- <sup>80</sup> Appignanesi, *Mad, Bad and Sad* p. 10.
- <sup>81</sup> See E. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: 1914-1991* (London: Abacus, 2012 [1994]), p. 10.
- <sup>82</sup> Wise, *Inconvenient People*, pp. 376-385.
- <sup>83</sup> Noted in John Day's review of *Umbrella*, 'Wizardly Contrivances' in *London Review of Books*, 34:18 (27 September 2012).
- <sup>84</sup> Foucault, *Madness and Civilization*, pp. 6-7.
- <sup>85</sup> For more on the 'neo-liberalisation' of mental health care see T. Lemke, "The Birth of Bio-Politics": Michel Foucault's lecture at the College de France on Neo-Liberal Governmentality, *Economy and Society* Volume 30 Number 2 May 2001: 190–207.